

Executive Summary

What Instructional Coaches Need from their Principals and Districts

Introduction

In the era of No Child Left Behind, the stakes are high for both the learners and the systems held accountable for student learning. The increasing demands for high levels of student achievement, college and career preparedness, and equitable access to robust teaching and learning are felt by our nation's school systems at a deep level. They have responded to this demand by implementing a vast number of strategies and programs designed to influence teacher effectiveness, one of which is instructional coaching.

In the face of difficult economic times, it becomes vitally important that school systems maximize the return on their investment in their instructional coaching programs. School systems need more than literature detailing how to develop a strong coaching model and a list of strategies coaches should use to create effect teacher change in practice. School systems need to know how to effectively support their coaches and maximize their impact on the learning system. The purpose of this grounded theory study was to discover the elements that create a sense of support for an instructional coach in a school setting. We will ask:

- 1) What supports the work of an instructional coach?
- 2) How do instructional coaches believe school principals support their work?
- 3) How do instructional coaches believe district systems support their work?

Literature Review

School districts, states, federal programs and foundations have poured large-scale financial resources into instructional coaching programs expecting increased student achievement, lowered teacher turnover, positive change in teacher quality, and enhanced distribution of school based leadership. It is the prevalence of studies that have linked teacher quality to student achievement and high quality professional learning to teacher effectiveness that has given weight to the instructional coaching model (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Sanders &

Rivers, 1996; Wenglinsky, 2000; Wright, Horn, & Sanders, 1997; Jordan, Mendro, & Weerasinghe, 1997; NRTAC, 2010)

Traditional professional development models, one-shot trainings with little to no follow up, have been criticized for their lack of positive impact on change in teacher practice and positive effect in student achievement (Darling-Hammond & McLaughlin, 1995; Novick, 1996; Showers et al 1987). However, instructional coaching and peer coaching models have been linked to student achievement increases and change in teacher practice (Denton, Swanson & Mathes, 2007; Joyce & Showers, 1988; Stephens et al, 2007).

However, coaches hold minimal formal authority in the schools where they work and are often undermined by teachers they are attempting to support (Donaldson et al., 2008; McKenna & Walpole, 2008). In the school setting, it is the principal who holds the formal authority and whose actions greatly impact the work of the instructional coach.

As a growing body of research documents the effects of successful leadership practices, Kenneth Leithwood and Carolyn Riehl (2003) have identified effective leadership practices in their review. The three core practices that school leaders should pay mind to are:

- **Setting directions:** which includes identifying and articulating a vision, fostering the acceptance of group goals, and creating high performance expectations.
- **Developing people:** which involves offering intellectual stimulation, providing individualized support, and providing an appropriate model.
- **Redesigning the organization:** which includes strengthening school cultures, modifying organizational structures, and building collaborative processes.

Pankake and Moller (2007) share their perspectives regarding what school-based coaches need from their principals based on their experiences working with principals and coaches over the last twenty-five years. According to these authors, in order to take full advantage of school-based coaches, principals must provide the following support:

Executive Summary

What Instructional Coaches Need from their Principals and Districts

- 1) Collaboratively build and monitor an action plan
- 2) Negotiate the relationship
- 3) Be available
- 4) Provide access to human and fiscal resources
- 5) Maintain the focus on instructional leadership
- 6) Help maintain balance to avoid overload
- 7) Protect the coach's relationships with peers
- 8) Provide leadership development opportunities.

Both coaches and principals are impacted by the work of the district. Like principals, central office administrators are critical to the success of any change effort and school reform (Hightower, 2002; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; O'Day, 2002; Rowan, 1990; and Thompson et al 2008). Johnson and Chrispeels (2010) specifically note that central office staff members strengthen school reform efforts by aligning structures (policy and practices), and resources (programs, data, and information); increasing the level of professionalism through strong relationships (building trust, developing professional accountability and strengthening personal commitment to learning and growing); and enhancing communication (providing consistent messages, creating transparency, and blending face-to-face communication with other delivery methods). Clearly, understanding the interplay between the support provided by principals and central office leaders and what it takes to effectively instruct coaches is vital.

Method

A suburban, public school district located in a Western state was selected for this study. The district was medium-sized and served over 15,000 students in 30 schools during the 2010-2011 academic year. It was a research site because it allowed for maximum variation in several areas: student demographics, year's experience of instructional coaches, and elementary school size.

Following the typical procedures for ground theory studies, the participants selected were theoretically chosen to best formulate the theory. A purposeful sample of 7 coaches was selected; all 7 coaches were

each interviewed for one hour. A semi-structured focus group was designed as a follow-up. The purpose of the focus group was primarily to determine if the themes that emerged from researcher's point of view aligned with the participant's point of view. Four of the seven participants were able to attend and perform this member check.

Findings

The current body of research provides little insight as to what principals and districts should do to support instructional coaches in their work. The coaches in this study however, were able to clearly indicate specific attitudes and behaviors principals and districts should take to support them and increase their overall effectiveness as coaches. The attitudes and behaviors that support instructional coaches in their work are:

Attitudes:

- Belief in the Value of Coaching
- Learning is Everyone's Job

Behaviors

- Creating of Shared Vision and Purpose
- Setting Clear Expectations for Coaching
- Holding Teachers Accountable for Accessing Coaching
- Protecting and Championing the Integrity of the Coaching Role
- Providing initial and ongoing training

Belief in the Value of Coaching

Instructional coaches feel supported by principals and district leaders who firmly believe in the value of coaching. When principals and district leaders believe in coaching, instructional coaches feel that support immediately. Consider Kaylee's experience with principals who were "on board" from the start:

I feel like my principal was really responsible for bringing coaching to the district. It was the excitement this principal had like, "We have to jump on this bandwagon; we can do it!" In fact, this principal told me that I had the best job, a dream job, "What you are doing, I can't go back and do, but you can!" Our principal

What Instructional Coaches Need from their Principals and Districts

made us feel like we were on the top of the world. It was really that exciting force that got us going through the beginning stages and on the path we are now.

Julie, on the other hand, is strengthened by the support primarily given by the district instructional coach coordinator. She enjoys working with her principal, but she is not certain the coaching position and role is valued.

I feel I get a lot of support from the district coordinator. I really appreciate the meta-coaching and the time to connect with the other coaches. It helps me reflect on areas that I can improve in my own practice. At the building, I regularly meet with my principal and discuss what is going on in the building, but my responsibilities are not clearly defined and connected to what we are doing in the building. There's not really a vision for how coaching is supposed to work in our school.

Coaches across the interviews and during the focus group describe the belief in the value of coaching as core to the overall support given by principals and districts. This attitude has an effect on the behaviors and actions taken by principals and districts and is apparent in what they do and say.

Learning is Everyone's Job

When the principal and district demonstrate an attitude that learning is everyone's job, instructional coaches feel supported. A belief that all everyone should continually work to improve his or her knowledge, skills and practice aligns well with the systemic implementation of coaching. The position itself is there to support continuous improvement, so when principals and districts project that same attitude it constitutes a foundational level of support. Lucille passionately describes her personal point of view in the following way.

There has to be a systemic presence, a cultural norm that we are all here, bottom line, to improve student achievement. We know that unless we continue to develop our practice, it isn't going to happen. I don't care how developed you are, how masterful a teacher you are, you are going to work with a different class ever year, with different needs and you are always on a journey learning along the way.

Through the interviews, a number of examples of how principals demonstrate their

own belief in continuous improvement were shared. Several coaches cited times when the principals themselves asked for "coaching" to plan for an upcoming event or resolve a problem or issue. Coaches recounted times when the principal shared what he or she was learning or refining in his or her own practice.

The supervision and evaluation process can be an arena where principals and districts develop a cultural norm of continuous improvement and learning. Coaches feel supported in their work when they are referred to as "go-to" people for professional development and one-on-one support. All of the coaches explained that they feel supported when their principal specifically invites and reminds their staff to access them for personalized learning opportunities as well as small group and/or grade level team reflection and planning.

Developing a Shared Vision and Purpose for Coaching

The participants all shared how important the district is to the development of a clear, shared vision for instructional coaching to all the district stakeholders. As Laura recalls, "I remember in the beginning getting the information from the district about what coaching is, and what coaching isn't, that was just so clear and it really helped everyone begin to understand the roles and responsibilities of coaching." The district also supported coaches by being available to help deepen the vision of coaching by modeling coaching conversations within buildings. Mary Ellen remembered a time when the district coordinator came to her building to coach her in front of her staff. "I think it really helped the teachers to see me getting coached. Before that experience, they really didn't know what I meant when I talked about coaching versus consulting, or coaching versus collaborating. They needed to see what coaching what to understand it." Kaylee described how instructional coaching in her school aligned with her school's goals to improve student achievement in reading and writing.

Since the beginning my focus has been to support all the elements of our comprehensive balanced literacy model. Our principal explained that I was available to support with guided reading, interactive writing, interactive editing. The

What Instructional Coaches Need from their Principals and Districts

next year I was to help teachers understand how to implement the new literacy assessments and analyze the data to inform their practice. Now we are working on writing, we've all been to a training and my job is to provide follow-up support for all the teachers. Every year it has been a different focus, but my principal always shares how I am here to support our building work.

Leithwood and Riehl (2003) noted that the principal behaviors of setting a school direction, identifying and articulating a vision, and fostering the acceptance of group goals were critical to success. This emergent theme supports those findings.

Setting Clear Coaching Expectations for Teachers

None of the participants revealed any specific district expectations related to how often or when coaches should be accessed by teachers. This was an area where the coaches felt a lack of support from the district level. Some of the participants acknowledged the difficulty their district may have mandating coaching due to contractual agreements regarding personal plan time, but they also stipulated that they would feel more supported in their work if the district was able to set clear expectations for teachers with regards to coaching.

Most of the participants revealed that their principal has done what the district has not - set clear coaching expectations to the staff with regards to how often and/or when they should be accessed for individualized support. However, a few of the participants feel that their principal has not clearly expressed his or her expectations to the staff regarding how often and/or when teachers should access coaching. According to these participants, it makes coaching feel optional and unimportant.

In the schools where the use of coaching is clearly expected, the principals have embedded the practice within the supervisory process, detached from the evaluation components of the process. In this system it is assumed that all teachers have individual goals and that the teachers should be accessing the coach to support them through the process.

Other expectations have been set by various principals and those include the

expectation to meet with the coach during specific team planning times or data analysis times. Furthermore, some principals have tied training follow-up to an expectation to access the coach. Other principals have set expectations for teachers to access coaching through peer observations and lab classroom visits. Kaylee shares how her principal gradually increased the expectations for coaching over time. She feels this strategy has made her feel very supported in her role.

My principal mandates coaching and those expectations have gone up every year; every year there is a little more incorporated into it. In the beginning it was a half hour mandatory team data conversation, every month with every team. Then, last year a half hour learning walk was put into place with every team... and this year individual coaching has been tied into our PD [professional development]. We were all trained in the same strategies and it is now mandatory that each teacher complete a full cycle of coaching with me by a certain time.

Candice has worked with two different principals, and each created clear expectations for teachers regarding how they should access coaching. "Working with me is an expectation throughout the year. Everyone is a learner here; there's a strong culture for that. Our principal set the expectations up front and now it feels natural, teachers want to meet with me all the time. It feels so good to be used!"

Developing people and providing individualized support through an appropriate model was found to be a core school leadership practice as noted by Leithwood and Riehl (2003). Setting clear expectations regarding the personal development and growth through the use of the coaching model is congruent with this current research.

Following Through on Expectations and Holding Teachers Accountable

Each participant acknowledged the theme of accountability and follow through. They revealed its importance at the building level, as acted upon by principals and at the district level, as acted upon by district personnel. The meta-coaching provided by the instructional coach coordinator, held each coach accountable for engaging in regular

Executive Summary

What Instructional Coaches Need from their Principals and Districts

planning, reflecting and problem-resolving conversations throughout the year (Costa & Garmston, 2002). Meta-coaching is the process of coaching a coach.

The instructional coach logs hold coaches accountable for how they use their time and how they monitor and adjust how their time is used. Since this district does not set clear expectations for teachers regarding how often and/or when they access coaching, there is no perceived accountability in this area for teachers.

All the participants feel supported when their principal follows through and holds teachers accountable when there is an expectation to be coached. At Lucille's school, the expectations to access coaching is voluntary except when the principal sets specific individual expectations for teachers to access the coach. When the principal doesn't follow through or hold teachers accountable once those expectations are set, Lucille feels less supported.

For example, there's been a couple of times where the principal has suggested to certain teachers to meet with the coach, but then it never happens. And that's okay, but if the principal never follows up with that teacher on her learning it's like, I guess it's not really important that you learn and grow. I think the principal can follow through without being oppressive or negative; it doesn't have to be the principal saying, "Well what are you going to do about this?" But let's say the teacher never tries those things he said he would or never accesses the coach that person is never held accountable for the improvement of his instructional practice, what does that say about how serious we are about improving?

The coaches in this study revealed that they feel more supported by their principals when they follow through and ensure that teachers are accessing coaching. Like Lucille articulated, holding teachers accountable does not need to feel "oppressive or negative" though it may take a good deal of practice for principals to do this in such a way that feels positive and encouraging.

Protecting and Championing the Integrity of the Coach's Role

This study was conducted during the state assessment period, and while there never seems to be enough time to go around, the participants were especially aware of how their principals support them by protecting and championing the integrity of their role during assessment season. Instructional coaches often straddle the world between teacher and administrator; yet hold minimal formal authority in the schools where they work (Donaldson et al., 2008; McKenna & Walpole, 2008).

Most coaching models are framed to keep coaches strategically apart from the evaluation process for very good reasons: the maintenance of trust, confidentiality, objectivity and collegiality (Killion & Harrison, 2006; Knight, 2007; Literacy Coaching Clearinghouse, 2010; and Pankake & Moller, 2007). The coaches in this study felt that the district had supported them well in this area. They could each cite numerous documents that clearly delineated what coaches roles should look like and what they should not look like.

Laura remembered from the very beginning when the instructional coaches received training they were told that the majority of their time should be spent directly supporting teachers in their classrooms. She explained how their time logs help them monitor their use of time. Once, when the district noticed that the coaches were spending too much time attending district training, the coach coordinator modified and adjusted the calendar so that coaches could stay in their buildings more and coach.

The coaches also feel supported by their principals when their role is protected from excessive administrative tasks that may include multiple meetings, data entry for other teachers, class coverage (acting as an emergency substitute teacher), assessment proctoring, making copies, disciplining students, school beautification efforts, and grading papers for teachers. These coaches understand that all school personnel is asked at certain times to "chip in" when there are big jobs to do. However, they feel that they shouldn't be asked to perform administrative or clerical tasks more often than any other

Executive Summary

What Instructional Coaches Need from their Principals and Districts

faculty member in the building as it devalues their role.

Coaches also feel supported when their principal takes an interest in what they do and takes time to meet with them on a regular basis. Connie shared that her principal has an open door policy in addition to their regular meeting time. This allows her to keep her principal abreast of the progress they are making on their school improvement goals. Candice feels supported when she and her principal plan building professional development together. She explained that her principal has invited her along with other teacher leaders to serve on their school leadership team. Involving her as in these shared leadership experiences builds upon her role and responsibilities as an instructional coach.

Mary Ellen appreciates the trust that has been built between her and her principal. There is little more sacred than trust and confidentiality. Her principal will not ask her to make evaluative or judgmental statements regarding teacher performance. This maintains the integrity of her position and makes her feel supported. All the participants agreed during the focus group that the above practices are vital to feeling supported by your principal.

Providing initial and ongoing training

The foundational knowledge and skills the coaches have support them in their work. Some of these skills were unique and different from each other. For example, Lucille described her hope and optimism as a trait that helped support her as a coach. Mary Ellen noted the long-standing relationships she had with staff members as support for her in her work. Candice acknowledged her deep understanding of balanced literacy practices that continually support her in her work. While each coach was able to isolate personal attributes and characteristics that support them, they all identified the initial and ongoing training that supports them as a coach in the district where they work.

Candice, describes how the initial coaching training was an important form of support for her as she entered the coaching field.

In the beginning there was a lot of training. We all had eight days of Cognitive Coaching training and three days of KU

[Kansas University Instructional Coach Institute] training. That was so powerful. It got us all started off on the same page. I came into this having an idea of what coaching was, but I really didn't know how to coach. What I had before was just all this information about balanced literacy and I thought I had to teach everyone how to do it, but then I learned how to know when to provide consultation and when to really coach teachers through the learning process.

Most instructional coaches enter this role via classroom teaching and for most; it is their first excursion beyond the classroom walls. Coaches rely upon their abilities to develop trust and relationships with others, their approachable demeanor, and their own innate sense of courage. However, they all need to learn to be coaches and that is why the training provided by district is so vital. Mary Ellen explains, "I did this for a year before the district started providing support for all of us coaches. It was a lot better when that happened. It was like everyone knew what to expect, and we did, too!"

Laura shared how important the ongoing training was for her, "I learn so much from the other coaches! When we get together each month, it's like – wow! I'm not alone; I can do this. And when our coordinator comes over and meta-coaches me, it's so powerful because I know that I am improving as a coach."

Recommendations

Principals and district leaders must understand the attitudes and behaviors that support their instructional coaches. Principals and districts should evaluate how well supported instructional coaches feel in their systems and work to improve these conditions. Descriptions of how principals support coaches can be shared via new principal and district administrator induction modules as well as in professional learning opportunities for veteran principals and district administrators.

Effective instructional coaching has been found to positively impact teacher quality and student achievement. Systems that employ instructional coaches should understand the conditions that are needed to effectively support them.

Conceptualization of Support Coaches Need from their Principals and Districts

Belief in the Value of Coaching

Learning is the Work

Attitudes that Create a
Foundation of Support

The diagram above represents the collaborative conceptualization of the seven elements of support. The research is based on the findings from this participatory approach during the focus group. It was determined that the attitudes of principal and district lie at the heart of how coaches feel supported. Thus they are depicted in the center of the ring. The inner concentric ring details the most important behaviors principals and district leaders employ to increase levels of support. The third concentric ring details additional behaviors that demonstrate support. The research results indicated that the behaviors identified in the third ring are helpful, but when present without those in the second ring – they are ineffectual. Lucille summarized, “Having what’s in the last ring without the behaviors in the second ring isn’t really providing support, it’s just lip-service,”